

Advent Love:***Introduction:***

So. Today we're talking about Love. It's our last and final Sunday in Advent, this season that I do pray has positioned us to consider "hope, peace, joy," and today "love," at least a little more than we might otherwise have.

I want to talk about becoming a "loving person," today. What it means to be a "loving person."

I don't know if, as I talk about love this morning, anything I share will be surprising to us, but I think it will be good. So don't prepare yourself for surprises; but let's invite God to remind us of what we already know, and live up to that.

Let's pray.

Prayer:

God who is love. Be with us now; gather our hearts into your greater heart, our loving into your greater loving. And still us, for a moment, inside your persistent, forgiving, knowing love for us. Don't let me mislead us, and be with my preparation here, and now. In Jesus' name.

Love's Far Horizon:

So, we are talking about love.

Love has a far horizon, you know? Love has a far horizon. In some real way love is proved in the long accumulation of choices that we make, a tally that's honestly longer than the 37 years I've lived.

But the truth is that we people rarely think of what decades down the road will bring, and rarely take the opportunities life brings us to summarize our lives and consider whether they are ones set apart with love or not. Of course, Advent gives us a chance to look at our lives more closely than we might otherwise do.

An Accumulation of Choices:

But the fact that we often live in the near moments instead of thinking far ahead of ourselves points out starkly that a loving life takes shape in an accumulation of choices. We move from choice to choice, action to reaction, and it's all these things together that gather up over time into a heavy record, a thing with force, a presence, that's either loving or something less than loving.

When Paul says that Love is patient, that love is kind, that love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude, that it doesn't insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful, it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but in truth, that it bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things, when he says this, he's pointing out the way these things of love, these ways of love, they happen in our moments, in our immediate right nows. The all things that love endures, and hopes through and bears

through: these are things that go on in “right nows,” aren’t they?

And the reason I think that to say a person is loving, is marked by love, we have to look at the total sum of their choices, the accumulation of their lives, is because we are very good at holding our breath for a little bit. We're good at short sprints. Any one of us can, for a little while, act loving. We can suck it up and be patient or not boast or avoid rudeness for short stretches--during life group, or on Sunday morning, or at a funeral or a wedding or a family reunion, during the Christmas dinner--but to consistently pursue a life stained through with love...it takes more work.

It just takes more work. Because, as we know, everything in the world around us set against love. Which is why God had to figure out a way to sneak into the world around us, and break its rules from the inside out, and give us the power to be loving the way Paul describes love here.

Love just takes work, right? It takes work to love well.

Sorry:

And I'm only a little sorry, but I am going to I'm going to just skip the part of this sermon where we talk about how “love” is more than an emotion, and discuss what it means to “be in love,” because I'm basically sure we've heard that spiel before. Being “in

love,” is a fine thing, a good thing, a miraculous thing: but it’s focus is narrow, it’s emphasis is usually self-centered, and the emotional high that comes with it is simply unsustainable over 80 or 90 years. I'm not going to spend the rest of our time categorizing love, and how it's different to love our spouse than it is to love tacos. That's low-hanging fruit, a discussion that I don't think serves us well.

Practice:

But Love takes effort, accumulating a lifetime of loving choices takes work. And it’s built on a conscious decision to turn away from impatience, from boasting, from jealousy, rudeness, and arrogance. It requires a conscious decision to reject impatience and choose patience, to keep a thick skin, and stay centered in the Lord so that we’re not irritable, irritated, or resentful. Love takes work.

What it takes, really, is practice.

When we talk of patient people, we’re talking about people who have practiced patience so much that patience has entered into them and sets them apart. It has recategorized them. We mean the same thing when we talk about humble people, or kind people, or hopeful people. These are people who have, for some reason or another, practiced hope and kindness and humility for such a long time that they really have become hope or kindness or humility embodied, right?

Do you know people like this? They are heroes, aren't they? But life isn't like the movies; we don't become heroes by being in the right place at the right time; we become heroes by doing the right thing, the same way we have for days and months and years. If we're heroic in this way, famous for some choice we've made, it's only because someone happened to notice us doing what we always do, just being our kind, patient, humble, or hopeful selves at a moment when the spotlight turned our way.

Love Becomes Natural:

This intentional practice of the virtues that are part of love does a thing to us. It turns, slowly, into habit, into gut-response. And habit solidifies, over time, into nature, into who we really are: loving, or something else.

Like a bodyguard trained to automatically dive into a bullet, we find that, over time, we become trained to automatically love: to automatically give the benefit of the doubt, to automatically turn toward forgiveness instead of bitterness, to automatically deny ourselves the pleasure of criticism, and grudge-holding, and distrust, and instead, automatically act with grace toward another, automatically endure whatever thing comes our way, hope through whatever loss faces us, bear through whatever problem we're presented with.

Because this is just who we are, you know? While we were busy living our lives, making a hundred choices a day, our nature firmed up like concrete. We became people others would say are loving without even really noticing anything was happening to us. But as we go about living, something is always happening to us, to our character, our personhood.

Mechanics:

Do you see the mechanics I'm talking about here? If we practice love long enough, it becomes a habit and enters into us, defining us. We become loving people.

Over time, love can become natural to us if we use the supernatural resources God gives us to choose love in the middle of the opportunities life gives us to choose something less than love.

And it seems to me that the older we get as people, the less we're able to act loving when we really have not been making loving a habit of ours. Our nature starts showing, you know: we aren't able to sprint through a whole Sunday morning or a funeral or Christmas dinner and keep acting out of love, because it's not what's firmed up in our souls. We've been practicing other things: resentment, irritability, thoughtless & impatient speech.

I guess I mention this as a warning, and I might be wrong, but it seems like daily we are making choices

that over time will determine if we're seen by others as loving, or cranky. One of God's miracles for us, of course, is that he can soften the cement of our nature and change us more into people like Jesus at any point in our lives, if we turn around in our way of self-interest, and turn toward Jesus in the hope of a new way of living.

Jesus:

And Paul's list of what love is: it's Jesus, right? Patience, kindness, not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude, not irritable or resentful, bearing & hoping & enduring all things: this is Jesus. Jesus is the embodiment of love.

And as I've thought of it this week, a passage that we don't often turn to when we talk about love, and about Jesus as a model of God's love, has come to my mind again and again.

It's from Philipians:

Paul is writing to the house church in the city of Phillipi, and quotes a well-known hymn:

1If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. 3Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. 4Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

**5Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:
6Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be
grasped,
7but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
8And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
9Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
10that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.**

We'll pull this passage out when we want to talk about humility; which is fitting, because it's talking about humility, Jesus' humility, which we're supposed to emulate.

But basic to this passage is the way Jesus ultimately is turned not toward himself, but toward us, toward "the other." And we're supposed to mimic him, model our behavior after his.

And it really seems to me that in the final analysis "love" is being turned toward others instead of turned toward ourselves. All those things Paul talks about--patience and kindness and all the rest--they're things that happen when we no longer allow our needs to become the biggest, most important things in the

room.

We no longer dismiss the stuff of the people around us, but instead value that stuff, their stuff, as much as--or more than, sometimes--our own. Love is being as concerned for whoever is in front of us, alive in their mess, as we are concerned for ourselves.

It's the habit of every great saint, and it's the life of Jesus: to consider the needs of those in front of us, and to seek to meet them as best as we can.

Work, Still:

And of course, of course, this takes work, right? Because everything about the world, and our lives, teaches us to think about ourselves, our needs, our wants, and not those of the people around us, especially people who aren't actively trying to meet our needs.

But every forward movement we make in becoming like Jesus as people and as a church, depends on us reorienting ourselves to others.

If we held as a church only one goal. If we got rid of every core value we're holding onto, and asked of everything we do, instead, "Is it loving?" because our only goal is to be more loving, what would be different about us? About our speech, our actions, our anything?

All you need?

And if we say that “love is all you need,” I think in some ways it’s right on. As long as we remember that love is not just feeling good, it’s working good out the same way God who is love worked out good for us, love is living Jesus’ life as best as we’re able to live it. It’s being concerned for the other person in front of us as much as we’re concerned about ourselves, if not more.

And beyond this, it’s working toward what’s best for them--which may not always be what’s best for us, or what’s best from our perspective. And it takes work to figure out the difference between “what’s best,” and “what I think is best.” But even if “love is all you need,”--love that’s defined by Christ--it sounds idealistic, right? A little cheesy. But I love cheese. And if Christians are called to anything, it’s to living out ideals in a world that needs to see them lived out as much as possible.

“This is a test...”:

And most of us don’t need reminded that we could be more loving; except that we really do, because it’s the reminders, over and over, that get us moving, you know? It’s the reminders that we respond to, over and over, and they help our character firm up like concrete.

So we should want to look at ourselves and see what we feel about others, and when we feel that way. We should notice what we think about others, and why we think that way. And we should take stock of our responses to those around us.

What we do:

Because, we people are in some real ways, what we do.

A famous person, caught philandering, said, oh, sort of recently, that he hadn't been true to his values. But values aren't "held," like stocks or bonds we can cash in when the going gets tough. If values are not lived, they're nothing but advertising copy, a coat of cheap paint on some rusty thing that is still going to crumble.

We are what we do. If you want to know a person's values, watch them. But we forget sometimes to watch ourselves, and we can say to ourselves, "I'm a loving person," I just happen to be impatient all the time, or "I'm a loving person," I just happen to give up on people as lost causes really quickly.

But a patient person, we know what they value, right? patience. A kind person values kindness; and kindness has entered into them. And a loving person, values love, values other people, values hoping all things, enduring all things, bearing all things so that the people around them can experience love. They have

become love, because they have opened their hearts to love, and practiced its habits, until their nature has changed.

And we Christians are without excuse when it comes to being loving, because we know that Love has made it's home among us, and in us through the Spirit. We know that "neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." We lean into love, and take every advantage love gives us. And we have drawn close to Jesus, the source of love, the one who turns to us and makes us children of God through his attention, and gives us the power to love as he loves, so that through habit and practice, we become love, loving people like he is loving.

Or, at least, ideally we know this. Ideally we do this. This is just an ideal though, right? We shouldn't really expect to become loving people, because the world's broken, you know. When Jesus says "love one another as I have loved you," he's just trying to motivate us, cause he knows we'll not even get close. He's just a motivational speaker, really; he's presenting a TED talk. Don't worry about it.

That's defeatist, right? Geez. But we live that way, or at least: sometimes our lives seem to say that what

we value is not loving, but is whatever is best for us. We trade patience for irritability, kindness for vindictiveness, humility for boasting, and contentedness for longing, we rejoice in deception because its so easy and effective, and give up in all sorts of things for all sorts of reasons--sometimes, sometimes.

Another Legacy:

But Smoky Row, we don't have to have a legacy like this. We have the power of God among us, and in each of us, and where two or three of us meet to catch up, the presence of the Loving God is right there. Every one of us and every one of the neighbors and strangers we meet is a chance for us to choose loving actions, to choose things that are for their good, even if it works against our good and our comfort, and in doing this, we know that we are firming up our character, we are proving our nature, and if we just stay the course, mimicking the Lord, we can stand on life's far horizon, and look backwards at the accumulation of my choices, and hear the Lord say that you were loving, you were loving, and in that way at least you were faithful. And again, of course, we serve a God who is loving enough to allow us to choose love no matter where we are in life, how young or old we happen to be.

We wait for the renewal of all things, for Jesus' return. But in our waiting, we must live like him, mimicking

him and doing what we know he would do. And what he did was live for us, so that we might have the power of God to live like him and love like him. It's through these things that we prepare ourselves and the world for his return. We are witnesses to a loving God. Will we be those witnesses today? Tomorrow?

Conclusion:

But our daily choices shape us, they change us, and in some ways maybe we are becoming either more loving or less loving every day. I hope that we can be people who spend time on our knees--in prayer for others, ourselves, in cleaning out someone else's dirty manger, because that's what they need, and it's the best thing for them.

If we're not people, who are known as loving, then something isn't right with us, and we need to toss away whatever file drawers of wrongs we hold, we need to shed our thin skin, and trade our strong sensibility of what's right and wrong for the stronger flexibility that comes from knowing God loves everyone, and the very least we can do is choose to show it, no matter what it costs us.

And yet, receive this: You, the people I am a part of, my church and my home, you are valued in the world because you have revealed the God who is love, the person of Love named Christ, here in this part of the earth. You are a shining light of love, and the darkness

of sin in the world around us hasn't overcome you. Together, the concrete of our character has firmed up in love, and most of the time I suspect you don't even notice it anymore, the way any humble person no longer notes their humility. But I will remind you, and I thank God for you.

Let's each of us live up to the example all of us together model, and our Lord alone has perfected.

Prayer:

Smoky Row, through God's strength and grace, you are the protectors of and witnesses to the world, and your power is love, choosing it, and embodying it, becoming love in and through all things.

Let's hold the course until Christ returns, and we can rest from the hard work of standing against the flood of self-interest and indifference that's coursing through the world.